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E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, PDEV, UK

SUBJECT: PARLIAMENT DEBATES DEVOLUTION

REF: LONDON 11474

SUMMARY - TWO-DAY DEBATE ON DEVOLUTION OF POWERS TO SCOTLAND AND WALES GOT OFF TO UNPROMISING START AS PRINCIPAL GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION SPOKESMEN DISPLAYED INSENSITIVITY TO BACKBENCH AND NATIONALIST FEELINGS, WHILE REVEALING THAT HMG HAS APPARENTLY MADE LITTLE PROGRESS TOWARD FORMULATION OF DEVOLUTION DETAILS IN PAST SIX MONTHS. DEBATE DID LITTLE TO CLARIFY THE MEANS BY WHICH WILSON GOVERNMENT WILL IMPLEMENT ITS DEVOLUTION PROMISES. THE NET RESULT WAS TO HEIGHTEN NATIONALIST SUSPICIONS THAT GOVERNMENT IS SEEKING WAYS TO DELAY OR REPUDIATE ITS COMMITMENT AND TO GIVE THE NATIONALIST PARTIES A TACTICAL ADVANTAGE. WE BELIEVE, HOWEVER, GOVERNMENT'S WEAK PERFORMANCE WAS THE RESULT OF MISHANDLING RATHER THAN FALTERING POLITICAL WILL AND THAT LABOR PARTY PRESSURE ON THE GOVERNMENT TO ACT ON DEVOLUTION WILL INTENSIFY. END SUMMARY

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1. WILSON GOVERNMENT OPENED FORMAL TWO-DAY PARLIAMENTARY

DEBATE ON SCOTTISH AND WELSH DEVOLUTION FEBRUARY 3. COMMONS LEADER EDWARD SHORT'S OPENING STATEMENT STRESSED NEED TO PRESERVE NATIONAL UNITY AND REITERATED MAJOR POINTS EARLIER ANNOUNCED IN DEVOLUTION WHITE PAPER AND LABOR PARTY POLICY (REFTEL). MOVING BEYOND THESE VERY GENERAL PRINCIPLES, SHORT REVIEWED PROBLEMS INHERENT IN DEVOLUTION OF POWER TO REGIONAL ASSEMBLIES (E.G., IN-EVITABLE DIVERGENT VIEWS BETWEEN WESTMINSTER AND ASSEMBLIES, NEED FOR COORDINATION BETWEEN MINISTRIES AND REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS, BLOCK FINANCIAL GRANTS VS. LIMITED TAX AUTHORITY FOR ASSEMBLIES) WITHOUT SPELLING OUT GOVERNMENT RECOMMENDATIONS AS TO HOW THEY MIGHT BE DEALT WITH. SHORT ALSO EQUIVOCATED ON GOVERNMENT'S EARLIER COMMITMENT TO PUBLISH WHITE PAPER OUTLINING GOVERNMENT'S DETAILED PROPOSALS THIS SUMMER. LABOR BACK-BENCHES WERE UNSUCCESSFUL IN GETTING SHORT TO REAFFIRM WHITE PAPER COMMITMENT.

2. CONSERVATIVE SPOKESMAN WILLIAM WHITELAW ECHOED SHORT AS TO NEED FOR NATIONAL UNITY AND ADDRESSED POSSIBLE ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS FOR SCOTLAND AT SOME LENGTH WITHOUT ONCE MENTIONING NORTH SEA OIL (SHORT MADE ONLY PASSING REFERENCE TO OIL REVENUE). LIBERALS GRIMOND AND THORPE BOTH SPOKE, CAUSING SHORT TO REAFFIRM THAT HMG OPPOSED PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION FOR ELECTION TO REGIONAL ASSEMBLIES. SCOTTISH (SNP) AND WELSH (PLAID) NATIONALIST SPOKESMEN WERE SCORNFUL OF GOVERNMENT STATEMENT AND, BY IMPLICATION, TORY POSITION AS WELL. SNP LEADER REITERATED HIS PARTY'S COMMITMENT TO INDEPENDENT SCOTLAND, BUT SAID SNP WOULD PARTICIPATE IN ASSEMBLY. THRUST OF PLAID CYMRU COMMENT WAS TO DEMAND THAT POWERS DEVOLVED TO WALES BE EQUAL TO THOSE GIVEN SCOTLAND.

3. REMARKS OF ENGLISH MPS (AND SOME ANTI-DEVOULATIONISTS FROM SCOTLAND AND WALES) GENERALLY QUESTIONED CONCEPT OF DEVOLUTION ITSELF AND OCCASIONALLY WERE IRRELEVANT TO QUESTION AT HAND: HOW BEST CAN THE GOVERNMENT IMPLEMENT ITS PROMISE TO DEVOLVE SOME POWERS TO REGIONAL ASSEMBLIES? SCOTTISH AND WELSH MPS, ESPECIALLY LABOR BACK-BENCHERS, REITERATED NECESSITY FOR GOVERNMENT TO MEET

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ITS COMMITMENT AND SATISFY LEGITIMATE ASPIRATIONS OF THEIR CONSTITUENTS. SCOTTISH NATIONALISTS, AS EXPECTED, CRITICIZED GOVERNMENT FOR ITS FAILURE TO PROVIDE CONSTRUCTIVE LEADERSHIP FOR DEBATE AND ATTACKED APPARENT WEAKENING OF GOVERNMENT'S RESOLVE TO FULFILL ITS DEVOLUTION PROMISES. MOST DRAMATIC INTERVENTION, HOWEVER, WAS THAT OF ULSTER UNIONIST ENOCH POWELL. SOUNDING LIKE A PROPHET OF DOOM, HE ARGUED THAT DEVOLUTION IS A PROFOUND

THREAT TO PARLIAMENT: "IF MPS EMBARKED FURTHER UPON THE INCAUTIOUS, HASTILY-COBBLED AND UNANALYSED COURSE OF ACTION, THAT THE GOVERNMENT HAS EMBARKED ON, THEN THE EXISTENCE OF COMMONS WITH ALL THAT IT MEANT TO THE COUNTRY AND THE PEOPLE WOULD BE ENDANGERED FROM WITHIN AS

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WELL AS FROM WITHOUT."

4. COMMENT: WILSON GOVERNMENT SCHEDULED DEVOLUTION DEBATED TO REDUCE PRESSURES FOR PRECIPITOUS ACTION WHILE HMG IS PREPARING ENORMOUSLY COMPLEX DRAFT LEGISLATION WHICH IS PROMISED FOR LATE 1975. WHILE DEBATE DID PROVIDE OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL TO AIR THEIR VIEWS, IT WAS NOT A PRODUCTIVE EXERCISE AND MAY ACTUALLY HAVE SERVED TO STRENGTHEN HAND OF SCOTTISH SEPARATISTS. THE GOVERNMENT'S APPARENT LACK OF PREPARATION, ITS UNWILLINGNESS TO DISCUSS SPECIFIC OPTIONS AND ITS EQUIVOCATION ON THE PROMISED WHITE PAPER WILL REKINDLE SUSPICIONS THAT GOVERNMENT IS SEEKING WAYS TO WEASEL ON ITS DEVOLUTION COMMITMENT. NATIONALISTS, OF COURSE, ARGUED THIS CASE.

MOREOVER, CHOICE OF SHORT AND SCOTTISH SECRETARY W//LLIAM ROSS AS OFFICIAL SPOKESMEN TENDED TO REAFFIRM WIDELY-HELD BELIEF THAT WESTMINSTER GOVERNMENT IS BASICALLY INSENSITIVE TO REGIONAL ASPIRATIONS. SHORT'S PEDANTIC AND PATRONIZING MANNER IRRITATED BACKBENCHERS AND NATIONALISTS, WHILE ROSS, WHO IS KNOWN TO BE UNSYMPATHETIC TO DEVOLUTION, WRAPPED UP GOVERNMENT'S CASE BY

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STRESSING UNITY THEME. BULK OF INTERVENTIONS FROM BACK-BENCHES ON BOTH SIDES OF THE AISLE, WHICH CONCENTRATED ON DIFFICULTIES INVOLVED RATHER THAN REASON;ABLE MEANS TO IM/LEMENT'L DEVOLUTION, SEEMED TO REINFORCE THESE DOUBTS. PRESS REPORTS OF REACTION IN SCOTLAND SUPPORT TH'E ABOVE ASSESSMENT.

5. DEVOLUTION CLEARLY CONSTITUTES A POTENTIAL THREAT TO UNITY OF UK AND MUST BE CAREFULLY DESIGNED TO AVOID DANGERS HIGHLIGHTED BY POWELL AND OTHERS. NEVERTHELESS, THE BULK OF THE SCOTTISH PEOPLE WISH TO HAVE AN INCREASED SAY IN THE FUTURE OF THEIR REGION (THE CASE IS LESS CONCLUSIVE IN WALES), THE SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY HAS SHOWN THAT IT CAN EXPLOIT THIS SENTIMENT IN A DESTRUCTIVE FASHION AND THE GOVERNMENT IS FORMALLY COMMITTED TO EN-ACTING LEGISLATION WHICH WILL DEVOLVE POLITICAL POWER IN SCOTLAND AND WALES, SO THE GOVERNMENT HAS LITTLE CHOICE BUT TO PROCEED. WE DO NOT BELIEVE THAT THE LABOR GOVERNMENT WILL FAIL TO MEET ITS OBLIGATION IN THIS REGARD. ITS APPARENT MISHANDLING OF THE TWO-DEBATE APPEARS TO BE LARGEY A FUNCTION OF ITS GROWING APPRECIATION OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL, JURIDICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE DIFFICUL-TIES INVOLVED IN PREPARATION OF THE NECESSARY LEGISLA-TION, COMPOUNDED BY ITS CHOICE OF SPOKESMEN. UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES, WE ANTICIPATE GROWING PRESSURE ON THE GOVERNMENT FROM WITHIN THE LABOR PARTY TO PUBLISH A MORE DETAILED WHITE PAPER THIS SUMMER. THESE DEVELOPMENTS ALSO INDICATE THAT THE MARCH CONFERENCE OF THE SCOTTISH LABOR PARTY WILL BE A PARTICULARLY CONTENTIOUS EVENT.

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